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Dynamiques des ports méditerranéens

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# The Mediterranean Sea: the language of history

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## The Mediterranean Sea: the language of history

Maria Helena TRINDADE LOPES

“When God created the Mediterranean he addressed it, saying, ‘I have created thee and shall send thee my servants. When these will ask for some favour of me, they will say ‘Glory to God!’ and ‘God is Holy!’ and ‘God is Great!’ and ‘There is no God but God!’ . ‘How wilt thou then treat these?’ ‘Well, Lord, replied the Mediterranean – I shall drown them.’ ‘Away with thee – I curse thee – I shall impoverish thy appearance and render thee less fishy.”

Al- Muqaddasi, *The Best Arrangement for the Understanding of the Lands*

“Everything must be recaptured and relocated in the general framework of history, so that despite the difficulties, the fundamental paradoxes and contradictions, we may respect the unity of history which is also the unity of life.”

Fernand Braudel, *Memory and the Mediterranean*

“... the glory that was Greece, the grandeur that was Rome!”

Edgar Allan Poe, “To Helen”

The history of the Mediterranean Sea is the history of communications between the people and cultures from the lands surrounding it.<sup>1</sup> Egyptian, Phoenician, Greek and Roman civilizations were some of the most ancient human civilizations organized around it. They had a major influence on the history and existence of cultures around the Mediterranean, and consequently are one of the key for understanding the development of Western civilization as we know it.<sup>2</sup> However, the way peoples of the Mediterranean basin were related to its territory was definitely not equal. Thousands of years have elapsed since the company

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1. F. Braudel, *Memory and the Mediterranean*, New York, Vintage Books, 2002; L. Casson, *The Ancient Mariners: Seafarers and Sea Fighters of the Mediterranean in Ancient Times* (second edition), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, and C. Freeman, *Egypt, Greece and Rome – Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.
  2. The concept of Western civilization is usually associated to the classical definition of the Western Culture: a set of political, literary, scientific, artistic and philosophical principles which set it separately from other civilizations.

more entrenched in a region (whose spatial perception was rooted in the imagination) was able to control huge empires.

In Egypt, men have created a space following their desire, their ability to dream and their imagination.<sup>3</sup> The barriers that encompassed their vision – deserts<sup>4</sup> to the East and to the West, waterfalls in the South and the Great Sea to the North – have been assimilated and turned into borders or bridges. Borders were closed and protected; bridges allowed the passage. They went, winning the freedom of space and therefore time. The Great Sea to the North, with its salty waters, led them beyond their world, and opened the way to “an adventure trip without return.”<sup>5</sup>

In Phoenicia, the human look stretched out on the wide world offered by the Mediterranean. The mountains, on the back, threw land into sea. As soon as men arrived, they were already left: the control of space always escaped from their hands. Phoenician men sailed to the taste of different currents and tides and supplied the construction of “images” or “epics.”<sup>6</sup> The “Forest of Cedars” became the “home of the Gods”, a privileged space that any man dreamed to reach.

Like all peoples of Antiquity, the Greeks also felt the magical nature of space. They called the Earth Gaia and the Sky Uranus. Gaia copulated with Uranus and the Titans were born. And then she mated with her child, Pontus, the sea God, and gave birth to Nereus, Thaumas, Phorcys, Ceto, and Eurybia. The rivers were gods and the high mountain deities. Hesiod explained the origin of everything from Chaos. However, Orphism presented a very different story: “At the beginning was Cronus, the Time.” Thus, space was being read, learned and accomplished. But when we seek the true Greek conception of space, we do not find it in Hesiod, in the Orphics, nor in the poets’ or sculptors’ works ... The Greek notion of space lies in Heracles, that Alexander<sup>7</sup> tried to copy. The paradigm of the hero’s destiny is marked by Heracles who serves life, carrying Greece to the world, because Greece is confused with the world in its huge size, its superior depth, in its particular way of looking forward and transmitting its message in its eyes ... by words, gestures, movements, or simply a “show of hands.”

Somewhat differently, the Romans became the paradigm of a practical look. Their huge task consisted in occupying effectively a vast territory, and controlling,

3. M.H.T. Lopes, *Estudos de Egiptologia*, Lisboa, ed. Associação Portuguesa de Egiptologia, 2003, p. 41-47.

4. The Arabic and Lybian deserts. Since the beginning of the human history they have been closely involved with the life of the Nile valley. See. K. W. Butzer, “Desert Environments”, in D. B. Redford (dir.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 1, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2001, p. 385-389.

5. The opening to the world determined the beginning of the end of a civilization that had as a guarantor of its permanence in the history, the preservation of their traditions and ancestral values. See. M.H.T. Lopes, *op. cit.*, p. 45-46.

6. “The Gilgamesh Epic”. See. A. R. George (ed.), *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts – vol. II*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

7. C. Mossé, *Alexandre*, Lisboa, Publicações Europa-América, Lda, 2005, p. 127-128. Under Alexander the Great, the most important centres of the Mediterranean became part of Alexander’s empire. Alexander’s conquests increase Greek wisdom and ideas all through the region.

mastering and defending it. They turned space into number and extent, rather than into a detailed topographic representation, a task that was favored. The present domestication of space<sup>8</sup> is inherited from the Roman knowledge and performance. Measuring to build, to mark, to separate, and to know. A part of our heritage of rationality and capacity to transform the world is certainly not alien to the Roman civilization. The Mediterranean thus vehicles the common roots of the societies and civilizations that flourished there at different times in history.

In the case of Egypt, the road of the Mediterranean, although always present, was only belatedly overcome.<sup>9</sup> The civilization, which owed its continuation, persistence and peacefulness to its unifying elements –Pharaoh,<sup>10</sup> Maat,<sup>11</sup> religion,<sup>12</sup> language<sup>13</sup>– and the peace that guaranteed its borders, progressively lost much of its originality: tradition, so well preserved for centuries, mixed with other traditions and cultural traits. The opening to the world allowed the access to knowledge of new political, religious and mental features (the case of language has been enriched with new words) but this “cultural exchange” was mutual, because Egypt also left to the world a set of messages and practices particularly noteworthy. A major benefit from Egypt in the Western civilization refers to the model of the creation by the word. Ptah, the Memphite creator god, conceived in his heart the cosmos in its various forms and did it by the creative force of the operative word.<sup>14</sup> The doctrine of the creative verb, which usually characterizes the biblical text<sup>15</sup> and is situated in a particular historic, geographic and time context,

8. J. Huskinson (ed.), *Experiencing Rome – Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 213-244.

9. The Egyptians are trading by sea from about 2 000 BC. Their commercial partners are the Minoans in Crete and later the Phoenicians. See. D. P. Silverman, *Au coeur de l'Égypte Ancienne* (ed. original, *Ancient Egypt*), Paris, Larousse, 1997, p. 44-47.

10. The Egyptian king, contrarily to others sovereigns, assumed, along the history, two different but complementary roles. On the one hand, we find its historic personality: the unifier king of “Two Lands”, to whom competed the legislative and executive functions, the administration of all the property and, from the New Kingdom, with the arrival of the imperialist politics, the role of supreme warlord. But, in parallel, the Egyptian king presented yet another character: he was a demiurgic personality that, through different ritual actions, took away the hostiles forces and guaranteed the order and the harmony of the world. See. M. H. T. Lopes, *Estudos de Egiptologia*, Lisboa, Ed. Associação Portuguesa de Egiptologia, 2003, p. 107-134, and D. O’ Connor, D. P. Silverman (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1995, p. 49-92.

11. Maat is a concept that operates as an ideological supporter of the Egyptian civilisation: state myth, cosmic order, social and ethic and moral order. See. J. Assmann, *Maat, l'Égypte pharaonique et l'idée de justice sociale*, Paris, Julliard, 1989.

12. In the Egyptian civilization everything is religion. This phenomenon determines the conception of the state as well postures, practices, emotions, artistic and intellectual representations. See. M. H. T. Lopes, *o Egipto Faraónico – Guia de Estudo*, Lisboa, Ed. Associação Portuguesa de Egiptologia, 2003, p. 61-83.

13. The evolution of the Egyptian language corresponds not only to the evolution of Egypt, but also to the great transformations that happened in the international juncture. Their “clearance” is the domain of knowledge, wisdom, but its “enrichment” with new words and foreign words, belongs to the area of politics and culture. See. *Ibid.*, p. 85-87.

14. See. J. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, New Haven, Yale University, 1988, p. 38-47 and, yet, B. E. Shafer (ed.), *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 96.

15. *Gn.1.*

actually dates back to a very different time and space: the Nile Valley, where the different priestly caste provided different answers to the most diverse phenomena. Gods also created man in the likeness of the cosmos. He could have been “born of her tears”<sup>16</sup> or have been modelled from the “dust of the earth”<sup>17</sup> by Khnum.<sup>18</sup> And again, we are confronted with the biblical message, but also lessons from elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> The heritage of Egyptian civilization persisted in history, travelling through the Mediterranean to meeting spaces as diverse as Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine and Anatolia, being intermingled in our Western tradition through two very distinct channels: the authors of classical antiquity and the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

The Phoenicians, in contrast, never had a strong sense of nationality, perhaps because the “Phoenician political space” was a larger territory than Phoenicia itself.<sup>21</sup> Men felt that they were more part of a cultural community than a political unit. Moreover, the geographical area in which these men were writing their story was a space marked by Egyptian, Hittite, Aegean and Semitic influences. These began to blur when “independence” emerged. Man surrendered to the sea in order to fulfil its mission: the unity of the Mediterranean world, the union between West and East, as a dream about to become reality. From the twelfth century A.C., the Phoenicians launched an adventure of international trade,<sup>22</sup> and this did not only alert people to the possibility of navigation, but did put in contact all the great antique civilizations, between 1200 and 332 A.C. From this position, the Phoenicians fulfilled a cultural mission, establishing contacts, exchanges, intimacies between the West and the Far East. But beyond this, they drove this unifying role even further, leaving us one of the most significant inventions of the cultural history of mankind: the alphabet.<sup>23</sup> It resulted from a long historical process of maturation, which manifested itself, for the first time in the transition from the II<sup>nd</sup> to the I<sup>st</sup> millennium. This alphabet spread eastward and westward. Hebrews and Arameans used it to transcribe their own language, and the Greeks, around 800 A.C., adapted to their needs a language which was not Semitic and vocalized it. This is the “genetic” relationship between the Phoenician alphabet and the Greek alphabet. The first went his own way and the second, by the way of Etruscan and Roman alphabets, gave birth to our modern alphabet.

16. M. H. T. Lopes, *O Homem Egípcio e a sua integração no Cosmos*, Lisboa, Teorema, 1989, p. 28-38.

17. See. Gn. 2, 7.

18. See. A. A. Tavares, *Estudos de Alta Antiguidade*, Lisboa, p. 131-150 and, yet, S. Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, London, British Museum Press, 2000, p. 46-48.

19. See. *A Epopeia de Atra-Hasis*. S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia. Creation, the flood, Gilgamesh, and others*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 1-38.

20. J. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt. History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2002, p. 282.

21. C. Baurain, C. Bonnet, *Les Phéniciens, marins des trois continents*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1992, p. 12.

22. The Phoenicians, more than any other seafaring people, opened up the Mediterranean, founding merchant colonies along its entire length. M. E. Aubet, *The Phoenicians and the West. Politics, Colonies and Trade*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 133-166.

23. R. K. Logan, *The Alphabet Effect: the Impact of the Phonetic Alphabet on the development of Western Civilization*, New York, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1986.

The Greeks truly played the role of pillars of our “conceptual geography.” Unlike the Egyptians, the Greeks chose to divide the land in order to unite men.<sup>24</sup> And if, on the one hand, this division was for a time the main reason for all their greatness and glory, it appeared later as the real cause of all their weaknesses. But the history of Greece, its definition of space, its organization in cities that constituted sovereign states, each having its own face, personality and life, was strongly influenced by its geographical situation. This situation established dialogue and subtle symbolic relationship between the mountains, which cover almost the whole territory, and the sea.<sup>25</sup> However, whereas the borders of Greece were extended into the area from Italy to Asia Minor, geographical conditions became in some case quite different from the previous ones, the Greeks oddly reproduced and recreated the same model of spatial organization. The Greek city,<sup>26</sup> the *polis*, represents thus a unique model of state, whose appearance seems to coincide with the beginning of colonization. In addition, these men<sup>27</sup> launched the roots of contemporary science and managed to “invent” History and Philosophy,<sup>28</sup> which are the essential bases of our memory building and our way of thinking man and the world. They also created the theater, the Olympics and “invented” democracy.<sup>29</sup> Who, in Europe, does not recognize the value of these archetypes? Curiously, too, the great highway of the Greek world, that followed the political history and placed in contact men from different states and cities, trade products, traditions and gods, was still the great sea, the Mediterranean.<sup>30</sup> With the emergence of Macedon and Alexander the Great’s conquests, Classical Greece went into the Hellenistic period. Greek became the lingua franca far beyond Greece itself. But Hellenism marked definitely the end of the Greek conception of political space, the end of classical times and of the freedom to be and to be isolated.

Rome, more than any other civilization before, was the Mediterranean civilization *par excellence*.<sup>31</sup> The interval of time between the establishment of Rome’s first province outside mainland Italy<sup>32</sup> and the Roman control of the whole Mediterranean is little more than two centuries.<sup>33</sup> Rome acquired its imperial nature *de facto* from the 130s B.C., with the acquisition of Cisalpine Gaul, Illyria, Greece and Iberia, and definitely with the addition of Iudaea, Asia and Gaul in the first

24. The most striking feature of ancient Greece was a breakdown in a multitude of towns that formed, then, almost corresponding states. Cf. F. Braudel, *op. cit.*, p. 228 sq.

25. Indeed, when we look at the “Greek world” faced with small communities that have settled in the narrow depressions along the coast, which access was possible only along the coast.

26. The most perfect or characteristic of a “city-state” Greece is Athens, whose territory encompasses all Attica, while its center corresponds to the city of Athens itself.

27. See. F. Braudel, *op. cit.*, p. 251 sq.

28. P. Ricoeur, “Filosofía: Hacia la antigua Grecia, de la Nostalgia al luto”, in G. Duby (dir.), *Los ideales del Mediterráneo*, Barcelona, Icaria Editorial, 1997, p. 259-282.

29. See. S. B. Pomeroy, S. M. Burstein, *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 343-348.

30. And the conquest of this sea accompanying the political history of the Greek world.

31. See. F. Braudel, *op. cit.*, p. 271 sq and P. Horden, N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea – a study of Mediterranean History*, London, Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 27-28.

32. Sicily in 241 BC.

33. See. C. Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 383 sq.

century B.C. At the time of the empire's maximal extension under Trajan (117 A.D.), Rome controlled the entire Mediterranean as well as Gaul, parts of Germania and Britannia, the Balkans, Dacia, Asia Minor, the Caucasus and Mesopotamia. With the capture of Egypt in 30 B.C., the Mediterranean became for the first time one political unit – a large lake within a single empire, a “Roman Lake”<sup>34</sup> surrounded on all sides by the empire. The Roman Empire built the known world around the Mediterranean. Its borders were only stopped by natural obstacles or defensible regions. And from that vast territory emerged the cement of our civilization: the power that made religion, adopted cultural values, attempted to implement structures and materials and raised all these aspects which are part of our heritage. It is no coincidence that, in the history of Europe, the great moments of renewal –whether societies of Carolingian Renaissance or Liberal Revolution– coincided with the recovery of traditional values. Classicism is always a return to the original values: the East, Greece and Rome.

“All history is the history of thought.”

R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*

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34. The Mediterranean Sea began to be called *Mare Nostrum* (literally: “Our Sea”).